

How to

talk to your elected representatives and other decision-makers

One of the main reasons to campaign is to influence decision-makers and get them to take account of your views and concerns while they are making choices about the future of your local services.

So, who makes these decisions?

Your area will be represented by a number of elected politicians. You may have local councillors, county councillors, MPs, MEPs, Assembly Members (London and Wales), MSPs (Scotland) and MLAs (Northern Ireland).

And don't restrict yourselves to politicians – remember there are school governors, health trust board members and others who make decisions that affect our local services.

You can find out who they are on local authority, school and NHS trust websites, and MPs/MEPs on theyworkforyou.com or writetothem.com

Deciding who to talk to

Different politicians are responsible for making different decisions so you wouldn't contact your MEP about something the council is responsible for as they won't be able to take the decisions that matter. It's worth finding out who does what and who is the most appropriate person to contact on each issue.

What is the local political landscape?

You need to check out the political landscape of your area, which party is in power locally, is it a coalition etc? Your tactics may vary, but whatever you decide to do will be, in some way, influenced by the political situation locally.

You should also look at which politician belongs to which party, what their majorities are, when they are up for re-election, if they are a spokesperson on a particular issue for their party and where their ward or constituency is.

Targeting

All the information you gather about local politicians and decision-makers will help you decide how to target your campaign work and who are the most appropriate people to speak to on a specific issue.

Maximising your influence

You know how people always complain about the fact that they only see politicians at election time? Well, that works both ways – the best way to influence politicians and other decision-makers is to build up a relationship with them over a period of time – not just when there is an issue you want them to address. There are several ways to do this.

- Personal contact works best, senior branch officers should speak to key local people on a regular basis
- Put them on the mailing list for your branch newsletter
- Respond to formal consultations as a UNISON branch – that will remind them that you have knowledge and expertise on public services and how they should be provided
- Encourage members to write to their local representatives – they respond better to individual letters than they do to ‘round-robin’ letters.
- Encourage members to go to open meetings of councils, scrutiny committees and health trust boards and ask questions. This is also a good way to meet elected representatives.

Once you have developed this relationship you can work with councillors to put helpful motions to council meetings, you can encourage MPs to sign Early Day Motions or write to ministers and ask parliamentary questions. You can ask scrutiny committees to investigate or review an issue.

Surgeries

It's not only GPs who have surgeries, politicians have them as well. It's when they invite constituents in to chat with them about their concerns and issues. Most MPs and local councillors hold regular surgeries and advertise them on local council websites, you will also be able to find information in your local library. Some politicians prefer you to make an appointment, others see people on a first come first served basis – it would be worth checking with their office first if it's not clear on the website.

It can be a bit daunting to think about meeting with an MP on your own – so why not take some colleagues with you. Best to keep numbers small, but if you are going with a couple of others, plan in advance what you want to say and what you will each contribute.

Lobbying

This is another way of meeting with MPs or councillors and talking to them about the issues that matter to UNISON members and local people. One person should write on behalf of the branch to request a meeting. Keep the letter brief and be clear about why you are asking for a meeting. You should also tell them how many people will be coming along.

After the meeting write and thank them for their time and to remind them of any action they have agreed to undertake.

If you are lobbying your MP at Westminster see UNISON's Effective Campaigning – A UNISON Guide (link www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/19308.pdf) for advice.